

Critique of the Issue of Role of L1 in Foreign-Language Learning

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Introduction

L1 use in the foreign-language classroom is a contentious and multi-faceted issue. Language learners, teachers in practice, academic researchers, and administrators all have contrasting opinions on this issue, which are held to varying degrees of rigidity. Words commonly associated with the issue and used frequently in papers on this subject include: ‘guilt’, ‘conflict’, ‘tensions’, ‘negative’, ‘forcing’, and ‘linguistic imperialism’. So before we even begin to closely examine and analyse the issue, we are met with a hostile linguistic landscape. Why is that? I believe two main factors are at the core of this issue: one factor is our ambiguous understanding of how instrumental the L1 is in acquiring the L2, and the second factor is the conflict between learner, teacher, and administrator. This results because of the previously mentioned parties all having differing attitudes and beliefs with respect to L1 usage in the foreign-language classroom. In this paper I will attempt to examine these two factors by first providing a chronological review of how our understanding of L1 usage has changed and how it presently stands. Then next moving onto an examination of my own teaching context, detailing the L1 issues my learners and I face and what initiatives I have implemented to minimise tensions arising from L1 usage,

and maximise its pedagogic benefit. Then I will finally present ideas for improvements to existing initiatives, and new initiatives.

A Historic Perspective

Current attitudes and beliefs relevant to L1 usage in foreign-language classrooms are still to a large degree informed by pedagogic theory and practice from over 100 years ago. By this I am referring to the direct method, which was a response to the grammar translation method. The grammar translation method's use of L1 for instruction and its limited ability to prepare students for real world communicative challenges were deemed unsatisfactory, and thus the direct method was developed in response. But it wasn't until the audio-lingual method that actual empiric evidence was used to support the validity of this monolingual style of English teaching methodology. This evidence came primarily in the form of behavioural psychologist B.F. Skinner's experiments with animals. The conclusions drawn from these experiments were then applied to how humans acquire the L1 and L2. This behaviourist approach to foreign-language pedagogy then further supported the monolingual style first seen popularised by the direct method. Another theory associated with behaviourism was the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis or CAH. This theory purported that learner error in the L2 was caused by the learners' L1, which became another reason to keep the L1 out of the classroom. So both the behaviourist theory of language learning and the CAH strongly opposed the usage of L1 in the foreign-language classroom. But soon these ideas were opposed and largely discredited.

By far the most famous critic of the behaviourist theory of language learning was Noam Chomsky. In his 'A Review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*' (1967), Chomsky refuted the claim that hypotheses based on lower

animal experimentation can be applied to higher mental functions such as the ones humans use to learn language. The CAH also soon attracted its critics, and as Lightbown and Spada (2006) state: ‘By the 1970s, many researcher were convinced that behaviorism and the contrastive analysis hypothesis were inadequate explanations for second language acquisition.’ Included among the reasons for their inadequacy were: inability of CAH to accurately predict learner error, and similarity of patterns of learner error when compared to children acquiring their first language. But despite the previously mentioned theories and hypotheses having been proven to be deficient in their understanding of the role L1 plays in L2 acquisition, they have still left a potent legacy of monolingualism and a negative perception of L1 usage in foreign-language teaching. So even in present day classrooms the common view is that any usage of the L1 is reducing productive L2 input, or negatively affecting L2 usage by the learner. The problem with this stance is that it assumes L2 has an inherently higher value when compared to L1 for all functions and tasks in the classroom. Also it assumes all usage of L2 in the classroom is meaningful and on-task with helping learners towards their language goal. Or, that a common cause of learner error is the result of language transfer, which doesn’t take into account that ‘Some errors seem to arise not from language transfer but from *transfer of training*.’ (Errey, 2012).

But why in this flexible era of postmethods and negotiated learning does the taboo nature of L1 usage in the foreign-language classroom remain? One answer might be because since the 1960s and 1970s there has been little empiric research into how beneficial the L1 is in respect to L2 acquisition. A closed door is a fitting metaphor in this respect, and one that Cook (2001, p. 2) uses in his paper ‘Using the First language in the Classroom’. Cook (2001, p. 3) in the subsection ‘Avoiding use of the L1 in

the classroom’ from the same paper mentions several symptoms describing the lack of engagement with the L1 issue. These included: the issue of L1 usage not being mentioned specifically in textbooks or training, and when if mentioned, it was usually in the form of tacit disapproval but without rationale. I have experienced these things in my own teaching career, and was especially conscious of them while teaching at *Eikaiwa* type private English language schools in Japan. My training and teaching materials never directly prohibited L1 use in the classroom. But contrastingly, my school managers often quite forcefully expressed that the L1 was forbidden in the classroom, but this was not usually backed by an explanation. (The reason may have something to do with how Japanese learners and administrators perceive non-Japanese teachers’ use of Japanese. For example, stakeholders such as learners and administrators might hold the belief that ‘native teachers’ are an L2 only ‘resource’.) One school manager even posted ‘No Japanese Only English’ signs similar to road traffic warning signs on the classroom and lobby walls. This ‘English-only’ point of view is recently becoming increasingly questioned and doubted. For example Raschka et al (2009, p. 157) conclude that: “English-only’ is a lazy rule in that it means we do not have to think about when and where the L1 might be valid and useful, or when and where it is pedagogically invalid and less than useful.’ My present teaching context of English oral communication classes at a private Japanese university is considerably different when compared to the *Eikaiwa* style private English language schools, but the issue of L1 is still present and there is still a divergence between policy and practice.

The L1 Issue in a Local Context

I teach at a private foreign languages university in Japan. The classes are forty-five minute oral communication classes, which consist of general

discussion, reading aloud practice, and practice of conversation strategies. All first and second year students attend these classes once a week, but with different classmates and teachers each time. At the university the students' other classes do have large oral components, but this is their only class that is a hundred percent focussed on oral skills. The unique nature of the class makes me very mindful not to 'waste any opportunities to provide students with natural, comprehensible input.' (Prodromou, 2002, cited in Ford, 2009, p. 66) and to 'maximise the opportunities for students to engage meaningfully in the L2.' (Ryan, 2002, cited in Ford, 2009, p. 67). But while mindful of trying to create an optimal learning environment, I do not necessarily feel guilty if for any reason the L1 does 'creep' (Cook, 2001) into the classroom. Similar to Ford (2009), after teaching for a certain period of time I have re-evaluated my attitudes and beliefs towards L1 in the classroom. (Professional development was and is a major catalyst for this re-evaluation.) When I first started teaching I was very much in favour of an English-only policy, which regrettably now, I often enforced in a needlessly draconian and authoritative manner. This is probably a familiar narrative (the 'softening' or periodic re-evaluation of teacher policy) to many foreign-language teachers for which there are a myriad of possible causes. In my case, lack of experience caused me to hyper focus on the classroom paradigm, and through a behaviouristic lens view class time as a limited finite resource in which no L2 input opportunity could be wasted by the inclusion of the L1. Now I have realised that while my learners do live in a monolingual society and class time is limited, this does not necessarily mean their access to authentic L2 input is constrained only to class time. Quite the contrary: there is a large body of exchange students on campus (about a hundred), a variety of study abroad and homestay programs provided by the university, and the technology available to students

to enable them to access all manner of authentic L2 input. However my main goal and responsibility as a foreign-language teacher is to provide comprehensible, meaningful, and accurate L2 input to my learners. But another no less important goal is to impart the skills and training that allow learners to become autonomous, which allows them to effectively access L2 input from a variety of sources, not just the classroom. I highly value learner autonomy, because ‘Autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners’ (Ushioda, 1996, cited in Dörnyei and Csizér, 1998, p. 217). Now having introduced my teaching context, and outlined some of my attitudes regarding L1 usage, I wish to proceed with an overview of the L1 issues that affect my practice.

L1 Issues in Practice

It is true that ‘Most teachers at universities in Japan are not generally constrained by institutional requirements in determining their policy regarding classroom language use’ and some ‘have never seen or been given guidelines regarding the issue’ (Ford, 2009, p. 76), but my institution does provide written guidelines in relation to L1 usage in the classroom (please see appendix A). They are not lengthy or forthcoming with reasons but what they do clearly state though, is a request for the teachers not to speak Japanese. It is obvious that this request is ignored by some teachers. I know because we use the open cubicle style of classroom where it is easy to hear what is happening in other classrooms. From my overhearing of other teachers’ lessons, it is easy to see that among the ten or so teachers that make up our oral communication course sub-department, we all have differing stances with varying degrees of strictness in relation to L1 use. Essentially this makes a written policy of L1 usage pointless. Whether this is because teachers are unaware of policy or ignoring it is unknown.

And of course teachers' attitudes towards L1 usage in the classroom can be a reflection of their own ability, comfort, and confidence in using the L1. In our sub-department all teachers possess varying levels of Japanese proficiency, (from none to JLPT Level One) but Japanese language ability is not a condition for hiring.

So how does this variation in teacher attitude to the L1 affect the learner? As stated earlier, the oral communication classes are small in size and their members including the teacher change every week. This is done for logistical reasons, and also to expose the learners to as many different varieties of English as possible. The negative consequence is that learners have to reassess each week the level of Japanese Language support they are able to receive and whether use of the L1 will result in a stern reprimand or no reaction at all. Anxiety caused as a result of the uncertainty will therefore increase affective filters. Of course each learner responds differently, but I hypothesise that in particular first year students and students of general low proficiency experience the greatest anxiety. Carson and Kashihara (2012) using TOEIC scores as a measure of proficiency have observed a link between student proficiency and learners' 'perceived need for teachers' and students' Japanese support'. They named this the 'The Proficiency Effect'. Typically this means students of lower proficiency perceive a high need (more than 80% of the <299 TOEIC score group) for teachers to understand and use the L1, while students of higher proficiency might want their teacher to understand the L1 but do not want their teacher to use it (Carson and Kashihara, 2012). This shows there is a clear rationale for when and when not L1 is appropriate in supporting L2 acquisition. But what happens when you have students of high and low proficiency in the same classroom?

L1 issues I come across in my own practice often happen when I have

classes with mixed levels. For example, sometimes students begin to chat in the L1 about non-class related topics if they are in a group or pair that has finished a discussion task ahead of others. I am often part of a discussion group or pair myself, so it is difficult to continuously monitor what everyone is doing. Another issue I commonly witness is the sometimes unkind manner in which usually students of higher proficiency correct and explain difficult concepts to students of lower proficiency by using the L1. This would not usually be a problem since ‘When explaining difficult language, teachers can accelerate the process by resorting to the students’ L1, to enable more time to practice the L2’ (Weschler, 1997, cited in Carson and Kashihara, 2012, p. 714), but if a frustrated learner does in a less than diplomatic manner it can raise affective filters for both the learners. Again, because I am often in a discussion myself I am sometimes unable to notice a student in difficulty and offer an explanation in the appropriate L2 teacher talk. However, this does not mean I prohibit learners from using the L1 to support each other. I believe fostering the attitude of learners which perceives their classmates as partners-in-learning is vital to increasing learner autonomy. But in order to foster this attitude, learners must be given clear guidelines as well as prefabricated phrases that enable the L1 to be a beneficial force in the classroom and not at the expense of L2 input or practice.

Existing Initiatives and Future Improvements

The primary reason students gave in Carson and Kashihara’s (2012) research for wanting L1 support in the classroom is if they felt ‘lost in class’. In my experience the majority of L1 use in the classroom occurs when a student who is ‘lost’ asks a classmate a question to clarify what they are meant to be doing, or how to perform a task. Therefore it’s fundamental

to give learners the phrases in the L2 that allow them to question, clarify, and explain. However, this is not meant as attempt to eradicate the L1 from the classroom, quite the opposite. I believe by using codeswitching and classroom English that the L1's benefit can be maximised. Classroom English phrases such as 'How do you say...in English/Japanese?' are taught to first years in their very first lesson after orientation, but it usually takes them until the end of the year to start comfortably using them. Below is list of initiatives I have implemented in my classes to minimise tensions arising from L1 usage, and maximise its pedagogic benefit:

1. Never admonish learners for using the L1. Authoritative attitudes do no promote active participation in what is meant to be a democratic discussion based class (Ford, 2009).
2. I always have a laminated copy of English classroom phrases in the centre of the table, and encourage students to use it among themselves whenever they become lost.
3. Encourage students to codeswitch (Raschka et al, 2009) to speed up the clarification process amongst each other. E.g. Student A: Does this mean '*explanation in Japanese*' in Japanese? Student B: Yes, that's right/No, it means '*explanation in Japanese*' do you understand?
4. Encourage in particular high proficiency learners to help support their classmates by codeswitching (see the previous example in number three). High proficiency learners perceive a low need for L1, so are prone to view it negatively. If they see the value in the L1 as a tool to maximise the time for useful L2 discussion then unnecessary tensions can be avoided.

These initiatives are not a complete solution, but I believe they have considerably helped my practice and responded to the learners need for

L1 support. In the future I wish to develop more initiatives that respond to the needs of beginner and advanced students in mixed level classes. For example I would like to develop a classroom English phrase sheet to use in tandem with the one I presently use. This phrase sheet would make use of codeswitching and primarily be used by high proficiency learners when introducing new vocabulary or explaining difficult concepts to lower proficiency learners. This then satisfies two factors that Carson and Kashihara's (2012) research discovered: one is the high perceived need for L1 support of lower proficiency learners and two is higher proficiency learners lack of need for the instructor to use the L1 (they would be the ones primarily using the L1 rather than the instructor, and I believe this would also help them re-evaluate negative perceptions of the L1 as a timewaster). Another future improvement would be to address the fact that the teachers in our sub-department all have different personal policy regarding the L1. An investigation into teacher's attitudes towards the L1 and then a negotiation of policy with the part-time teachers would help towards students having a consistent classroom experience. It is important we attempt to move towards a consensus, and while there is still no clear answer as to just how useful the L1 is in respect to L2 acquisition all teachers should be careful to remember that 'If students perceive a need for L1 support, and the teacher cannot or will not respond to this, it can lead to an unsatisfactory classroom experience for all (Burden, 2001, cited in Carson and Kashihara, 2012, p. 714).

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Appendices

Appendix A:

Transcript of University L1 Policy

‘Please use only English in the classroom and encourage students to do the same. If you can speak or understand Japanese, you may use that ability to help a student in trouble by teaching them the English equivalent of what they want to say. Do not use your Japanese speaking ability. If anything, use your J-E interpreting and translations skills! If students know you speak Japanese but you only use English in yours classes, they will respect you a lot more. This has been demonstrated in student surveys.’